Chapter 8

Selecting an Independent Evaluator

This chapter covers selecting an independent evaluator. It offers guidelines to ensure that the evaluator/staff partnership is a productive working relationship. The suggestions outlined in this chapter are not prescriptive; projects should select the options that meet their needs and are feasible to implement given available resources. Topics in this chapter include:

- defining independent evaluation;
- desired qualifications of Even Start evaluators;
- setting priorities for the local evaluation and evaluator; and
- selecting an independent evaluator.

Defining Independent Evaluation

The program statute, Section 1235 (15) of the ESEA, requires Even Start projects to provide for an independent evaluation of their program that they will use for program improvement. An independent evaluation is conducted by one or more individuals who are not directly involved in the project's administration. That is, projects must use an evaluator who is outside of or external to the Even Start project. Such evaluators are often referred to as independent, outside, or external evaluators.

In an independent evaluation, the Even Start project director, in consultation with the evaluator, determines the evaluation's purpose and overall scope. The evaluator will plan and conduct the study and provide an independent report of the findings. The rationale for employing an independent evaluator is to ensure that projects benefit from the perspective of an objective and unbiased "outsider."

Independent evaluators usually work as consultants to the Even Start program and generally are not employees of the partners responsible for administering the program. An exception to this rule, for example, would be large school districts or institutions of higher education that work in partnership with an Even Start project. In such cases, an employee of the institution may serve as the project evaluator provided that he or she does not work in a division involved in administering the Even Start program or the department responsible for providing program services.

Desired Qualifications of Even Start Evaluators

The Standards and Guidelines adopted by the American Evaluation Association (AEA) are useful in beginning a discussion about the desired qualifications of professional evaluators. These Guidelines set standards of professional practice and inform clients about the principles they can expect professional evaluators to uphold.

AEA Guiding Principles for Evaluators

Evaluators conduct systematic, data-based inquiries about whatever is being evaluated. Evaluators provide competent performance to stakeholders.

Evaluators ensure the honesty and integrity of the entire evaluation process.

Evaluators respect the security, dignity, and self-worth of the respondents, program participants, clients, and other stakeholders with whom they interact.

Evaluators articulate and take into account the diversity of interests and values that may be related to the general and public welfare.

The AEA principles emphasize qualities such as the ability to conduct systematic research, competency, honesty, integrity, and the evaluator's respect and sensitivity for all involved in the evaluation process. The specific qualifications of Even Start evaluators proposed in the following section reflect the AEA principles that are likely to be relevant to most Even Start program evaluations. The examples show evaluator qualities considered less helpful for achieving the goals of Even Start evaluations.

Desired Qualification # 1: Evaluators possess evaluation and measurement expertise.

Independent evaluators who conduct Even Start evaluations should possess the education, skills, and experience needed to design and conduct data-based evaluation studies. The evaluator should have formal training in evaluation design and measurement as well as experience applying those skills in evaluations of educational programs. It would be most helpful to Even Start projects if evaluators possessed the technical expertise to:

- develop evaluation designs with meaningful evaluation questions;
- evaluate the technical qualities of assessment instruments and help staff select appropriate instruments;
- develop surveys, interview protocols, or other desired instruments;
- monitor the collection and management of evaluation data;
- analyze quantitative and qualitative data;
- write evaluation reports and communicate findings to diverse audiences; and
- translate findings into specific program recommendations.

Desired Qualification # 2: Evaluators are knowledgeable about family literacy programs and practices. Even Start family literacy programs are complex and challenging to implement. Evaluators who understand the mission and practices of family literacy programs can support staff by helping to define key evaluation questions and interpret findings in light of common family literacy issues. Ideally, projects should seek evaluators with experience in evaluating family literacy

programs. Since this expertise may not always be available, the next best strategy would be to

Example: Expertise

A retired school principal, Mr. A. was instrumental in getting the Even Start program funded and is excited about the possibility of continuing his involvement by serving as the project evaluator. He is knowledgeable about family literacy and figures he can learn about evaluation "onthe-job."

Selection Issues: Without a background and some experience with program evaluation, Mr. A. can only provide limited guidance on evaluation issues. It is unlikely that he will be able to perform the full range of evaluation tasks expected of an independent evaluator.

Example: Independence

A school district employee, Mr. B. teaches computer science in the Adult Education division of the school district awarded an Even Start project. He has a background in data analysis and was approached by the Adult School Director, who is also the Even Start project director, about evaluating the Even Start program at their site.

Selection Issues: While his limited background in program evaluation may also be an issue, Mr. B. does not qualify as an "independent evaluator" because he works for the division of the school district that administers the Even Start project.

⁴ For additional information on Guiding Principles for Evaluators, see *A Report from the AEA Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (1999).

Example: Independence

Dr. C. is a professor at the university. She is known for her research in parenting education and has experience in program evaluation. The Even Start project has hired her to provide training, monitor implementation of the parenting curriculum that she developed, and evaluate the Even Start program.

Selection Issues: Dr. C.

possesses evaluation expertise
but her ability to function as an
independent evaluator is
compromised because she
provides services as a content
expert and will evaluate
implementation of her
parenting curriculum.

Example: Working Style

Ms. E. has years of experience working as an independent evaluator. She provides the project with an evaluation design and a binder of materials listing all instruments and a data collection plan. She tells the staff that her role will be to monitor their data collection efforts over the course of the year and write the report.

Selection Issues: Ms. E.'s directive style does not facilitate staff and stakeholder collaboration in the evaluation process. The lack of staff involvement may mean that the project's information needs are not addressed in the evaluation findings.

select evaluators who are willing to invest time in learning about Even Start program elements and practices.

Even Start projects sometimes consider selecting evaluators who are retired Even Start directors or consultants with expertise in a content area such as early childhood development or adult education. Although this is appealing because the evaluator brings family literacy or content expertise, evaluators should not be selected solely on the basis of their content expertise. Projects are better served by hiring experts in family literacy or a content area to help with program development, and then selecting a program evaluator with evaluation expertise. This separation of responsibilities also ensures that the content expert does not provide direct services or advice, only to be later asked to "objectively" evaluate the program.

Desired Qualification # 3: Evaluators work in partnership with staff and other

stakeholders. Stakeholders, project staff, and evaluators all play roles in designing and conducting an evaluation. Evaluation is a process based on teamwork. It requires everyone who is involved in developing and evaluating a program to work together to achieve their goals. The precise nature of the collaboration will vary by program, but at a minimum, staff and stakeholders should be directly involved in developing evaluation questions that address the project's information needs, discussing approaches for answering those questions, and reviewing data to interpret the findings. Evaluators who work collaboratively tend to seek opportunities for involving staff and other stakeholders in the evaluation; they encourage staff to express concerns and interests, value their input, and respond by being flexible and adjusting evaluation strategies to meet the needs of the group.

Desired Qualification # 4: Evaluators possess good communication and listening skills.

Evaluation expertise is only useful if evaluators can communicate in a manner that allows others to understand and interpret their work. Most project staff members have limited evaluation experience and are not familiar with evaluation terminology. Evaluators who use evaluation jargon without defining the concepts tend to inhibit rather than facilitate staff understanding; this may alienate rather than encourage staff participation in the evaluation process. To communicate effectively about evaluation, the evaluator must be able to define terms and explain concepts in everyday language that a layperson can easily understand.

As stated above, evaluation is a collaborative effort. The evaluator's role is to facilitate the involvement of others in that effort. In order to work effectively with policy makers, staff and families, evaluators must be able to communicate on a variety of different levels to different audiences. Effective communication skills also include the ability to listen and a willingness to respond to the concerns and issues of others.

Desired Qualification # 5: Evaluators demonstrate sensitivity and respect for people.

Evaluation is highly interactive. Its success depends on the quality of relationships between the evaluator and those involved in the project. To a large degree, this depends on the evaluator's attitudes and behaviors. Positive behaviors include 1) showing respect for others, 2) abiding by professional ethics (e.g., informed consent, confidentiality), and 3) communicating in a way that acknowledges the dignity and self-worth of those involved (e.g., solicits input from all staff, recognizes that successful programs are built on the strengths of the families and staff). Positive behaviors convey that the evaluator is aware of and sensitive to differences among participants (e.g., based on culture, religion, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and is mindful of the potential implications of these differences when planning and conducting evaluation studies and interacting with program participants.

Desired Qualification # 6: Evaluators demonstrate professional integrity and honesty.

Another important consideration is the evaluator's reputation for professional integrity in terms of completing tasks in a cost-effective and timely manner. Projects are encouraged to request information from the evaluator's previous employers and to ask prospective evaluators to disclose other roles, relationships, and time commitments that may affect their ability to perform the scope of work. Given that the evaluator will be entrusted with data about the program and the families served, it is also vital to consider the evaluator's reputation for honoring agreements about using data and findings. For example, evaluators should always receive specific permission from a project and families before using their data for independent research or conference presentations.

Setting Priorities for the Local Evaluation and Evaluator

Identifying information needs and evaluation requirements. In selecting an evaluator, staff members should begin by thinking about the tasks and services that they will need an evaluator to perform. The first step is to identify specific state evaluation requirements and other evaluation targets that apply to Even Start programs. Some states may also specify certain instruments and timelines for data collection and reports of project outcomes. Projects that receive funding or services through other organizations may also be required to address their evaluation requirements.

The next step is to engage staff and other stakeholders in preliminary discussions to identify key questions or information needs specific to the program. For example, a project director may be interested in surveying families about their perceptions of program services in order to determine why a high percentage of families drop out of the program after fewer than two months. He or she might ask an evaluator to enhance the evaluation by adding a parent survey to the required tasks of

Example: Communication

Dr. D. is a specialist in educational research. During his last presentation, the staff sat in confused silence as he presented results for the adult education indicators by stating that he used a crossed design and the results indicate that the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

Selection Issues: Dr. D.'s research jargon does not provide sufficient explanation to communicate evaluation concepts. Staff members who do not understand the findings will be less likely to use the data for program improvement.

Example: Respect

Dr. F. is an evaluation consultant. In her first meeting with the director she asks if she will be required to drive to certain parts of town to observe classes and meet with staff. She refers to the families as interesting research subjects and leaves a three-page informed consent form for the director to review.

Selection Issues: Dr. F.'s behaviors suggest that she may not have the level of sensitivity or awareness needed to engage Even Start staff or families in the evaluation process.

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Example: Competing Tasks

Mrs. G. has a very successful grant-writing and evaluation consulting business. Although she has an excellent reputation, her recent successes and increase in business have impaired her ability to provide her clients with the same quality, customized services, such as conducting on-site visits to observe the program in operation, as she has in the past.

Selection Issues: Projects may wish to gather more information about Mrs. G.'s availability to perform additional evaluation studies. documenting participant outcomes. (See Chapters 10 for ideas on determining evaluation questions and information needs.)

Prioritizing program needs and evaluation tasks. The initial steps should also include prioritizing the desired evaluation tasks in order to make the best use of the evaluator's time and expertise. Priority tasks would include the project's evaluation requirements and those considered essential for program improvement. Another way of prioritizing tasks is to identify tasks that are best completed by the independent evaluator and those that other program staff can accomplish. By prioritizing evaluation needs, projects will develop a more realistic picture of the services they need the evaluator to perform.

Determining levels of evaluator involvement. Once staff members have developed a working list of priority tasks for the evaluator, they should discuss the level of involvement they expect of their evaluator, both in the program and the evaluation. To a large extent, the level of the evaluator's involvement depends on the financial resources available for the evaluation, the evaluation requirements, the time available from the evaluator, and program staff's evaluation expertise. The closer the partnership desired, the greater the evaluator's time commitment and the greater the cost.

The relationship between program staff and evaluator will depend on individual circumstances and is likely to evolve over time. By thinking about the following four questions, projects can begin to determine the degree and extent of evaluator involvement they wish.

- 1. Which evaluation tasks should the evaluator perform (e.g., select outcome assessment instruments, write the evaluation report)?
- 2. Which evaluation tasks are most appropriate for others to perform, with the evaluator acting as an advisor or monitor (e.g., monitor staff data collection activities, provide advice on interpreting attendance data)?
- 3. What are the program's expectations for evaluator involvement in ongoing activities (e.g., conduct monthly site visits, attend occasional staff meetings)?
- 4. What other activities are expected of the evaluator (e.g., attend state and/or federal evaluator meetings)?

Most Even Start projects use an independent evaluator to complete tasks for which staff lacks the expertise or time, such as developing surveys or analyzing and presenting data associated with participant outcomes. Depending on the project's needs and available resources, the evaluator may be a frequent presence in project activities or be more selectively involved in key evaluation tasks.

Selecting an Independent Evaluator

Selecting the right evaluator should be considered a long-term investment. Time spent on the selection process will pay off in the long run. Optimally, projects will seek an evaluator who will continue to work with the project and provide evaluation services for the duration of the project's funding cycle. Spending time at the outset to ensure that the selection process produces the best project—evaluator match is an investment in the future and will save time, money, and stress.

The following steps for choosing an independent evaluator are guidelines; projects should adapt them to meet their own circumstances. Projects should use their own procurement procedures, reflecting applicable state and local laws and regulations, provided that the procurements conform to applicable federal law and the standards identified in this section. For example, projects that contract with an individual or business to provide an independent evaluation must follow the procedures in the applicable federal procurement standards located in the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR).⁵ The sequence of steps in selecting an evaluator is outlined below.

Step 1: Describe program evaluation needs. It is a good idea to begin by developing a written description of the high priority evaluation services. The description might be formalized into a job description or as simple as a list of talking points for conversations with prospective evaluators. It should include:

- a brief description of the Even Start program and its scope, e.g., location, number of sites and families served;
- a statement of the purposes of the independent evaluation, e.g., to evaluate families' literacy outcomes based on the state's performance indicators, to gather participant perceptions of program services;
- a list of key tasks and services the evaluator is expected to perform e.g., to work in collaboration with staff to design and implement the evaluation, interview a sample of families, aggregate data and analyze data, write an executive summary and technical evaluation report, develop presentation for Board of Education;
- an estimate of days, e.g., requires an evaluator for approximately 25-35 days in the next year, or the specific amount for the evaluation agreement, e.g., evaluation agreement is for \$10,000;

Example: Sample List of Prioritized Evaluation Tasks

Higher Priority Tasks

- Develop evaluation plan and key questions
- Analyze outcome data for state performance indicators
- Develop parent survey
- Write executive summary and technical report
- Present findings to collaborators

Lower Priority Tasks

- Conduct self study with staff
- Aggregate parent survey data
- Write up findings from parent survey
- Attend staff meetings

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⁵ For more information on the applicable federal procurement standards in the Education Department General Administration Regulations, see EDGAR, Sections 74.40 – 74.48 (34 C.F.R. sections 74.40 - 74.48) for institutions of higher education and non-profit organizations and Section 80.36 (34 C.F.R. section 80.36) for state governments such as state educational agencies, local governments such as local educational agencies, and Indian tribes and tribal organizations. EDGAR is available at: http://www.ed.gov/policy/fund/reg/edgarReg/edgar.html .

- a request for a mode of response, e.g., written proposal or meeting; and
- project contact information.

Clearly communicated expectations set the groundwork for a good working relationship and save time in the selection process. A clearly written description helps prospective evaluators determine if they are interested in the priority evaluation tasks and the expected time commitment.

Step 2: Sources for locating evaluators. The search for an evaluator should begin by checking the selection and contracting requirements of the partnership agency responsible for administering the Even Start program. The federal procurement standards, state, and/or local organization practices will govern approved sources, award preferences for evaluators from affiliated agencies, procedures for seeking bids, daily costs, and/or selection criteria.

Evaluators work in several ways. They can be independent, self-employed consultants, they may work for a company that specializes in evaluation and research, or they may be affiliated with an agency or university. Well-qualified and affordable evaluators may be found in all these configurations. Even Start projects seeking an independent evaluator might contact the following local sources:

- college and university departments that offer programs in evaluation and educational research or Even Startrelated services, e.g., early childhood development;
- state agencies, including the SEA Even Start coordinator and departments of education and human services.
 State agencies often keep bid lists of approved evaluators;
- regional or state affiliates of related professional organizations, such as the American Educational Research Association or American Evaluation Association. Some associations now have online directories;
- other Even Start or family literacy programs willing to share their experiences and recommend independent evaluators; and
- collaborators who may have employed evaluators.

Projects in larger cities might also consider placing an open-call newspaper advertisement for evaluator services. Projects in rural areas are more likely to conduct a wider search for evaluation candidates and may need to offer incentives such as reimbursed travel expenses to attract well-qualified evaluators.

Step 3: Review responses. Prospective evaluation candidates should provide a resume and a brief written response outlining their evaluation approaches and costs (unless the amount has been pre-specified). The evaluator's proposed activities should agree with the level of involvement desired by the staff and directly address the project's evaluation needs and priorities. Project directors should be wary of "canned" approaches that do not read as though they are tailored to the program's needs. When working with an evaluation firm, a large evaluation team, or a university, the project director should identify a contact person and request the names of the evaluators who will actually perform the work.

Step 4: Assess evaluator qualifications. Projects should seek evaluators with qualifications for the specific needs of the Even Start program. Prospective evaluators' written and oral responses will help project leaders judge the candidates' qualifications.

Potential candidates should show evidence of their skills and experience by providing a resume, a summary of related work, and references from past clients. Evaluator resumes may present education credentials or degrees in research or related fields; however, in order to determine whether the evaluator can apply this knowledge and produce useful products, the staff needs to review work samples, including written reports, evaluation designs, and instruments developed for similar projects, etc. Projects are encouraged to review writing samples or oral responses using the following criteria:

- messages and findings are clearly communicated and easily understood;
- the complexity of the material is communicated in an appropriate manner for the target audience, e.g. families, staff, and other stakeholders;
- the use of technical jargon is minimal; evaluators use laypersons' language to communicate evaluation concepts;
- recommendations for program improvement are based on the evaluation findings;
- there is evidence that the evaluator's work has been used by past clients; for example, evaluation results helped to reshape program plans; and
- the evaluator offers strategies for involving others in the evaluation process; for example, his or her management plan includes staff meetings to discuss evaluation questions.

Step 5: Make the final selection. It is difficult to give specific advice about the final selection of an evaluation candidate. Finding the best candidate requires the willingness to invest the time to ensure that the selection process is as thoughtful and comprehensive as possible. Applicable federal procurement standards and/or practices in the partnership agencies or organizations may dictate final selection procedures; for example, the evaluation agreement may be awarded to the lowest bid or give preference to women or minority-owned businesses. Projects are encouraged to be realistic about the selection process, and to realize that some compromise is inevitable. Given that projects may not find the "one" evaluation candidate who embodies all the desired qualifications, the best choice would be to select the candidate with the strongest professional references based on past evaluation work.

